

Civic Engagement in the 21st Century: Impact of Demographic and Social Change

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Summary

Demographic and social change could have long-lasting impacts on civic engagement / volunteerism. Future changes could bring about potential challenges and opportunities. The role of policy is to offer the necessary guidance, solutions and tools for managing the challenges and opportunities that result from changes in the demographic and social contexts.

Demographic Change

- Population continues to grow in Texas and the U.S. due to natural increase and migration.
- Population is aging: The percent of adult population age 60 and older will continue to increase while the percent of adult population age 18-59 will begin to decrease.
- In the next few years, baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) will represent an increasing share of the population 60 and older.
- Population will become more racial/ethnically diverse.
- Percent of population residing in suburban counties will continue to increase.
- Percent of U.S. population residing in Southern and Western states will continue to increase.

Social Change

- Federal, state and local governments are expected to be fiscally overstretched for the foreseeable future.
- Future programmatic commitments by the Federal government mean that the amount of resources dedicated to certain health and human services is not likely

to expand. Moreover, state and local governments are not likely to have the necessary resources to respond to growing service needs on their own.

Potential Impacts

- The need for additional health and human services will increase due to growth in the total and elder population. However, the capacity of government to meet those needs may be limited.
- The geographic distribution of population groups will call for an increase in services to areas traditionally known for having a weaker social services infrastructure (e.g., rural and suburban areas). As people age in place, they will require services to be available in their communities.
- Non-government organizations and their volunteers will need to play a crucial roll in providing services to help meet additional and growing needs.

Potential Challenges

- There will be a need for service organizations to motivate individuals who typically do not engage in volunteer activities. Boomers are often thought of as more individualistic, and have been far less civically engaged than other generations.
- There may be potential disagreement, confusion, and possible tension between government and non-government regarding priority populations, services, and service delivery method. There may be unreasonable expectations regarding the role that non-government organizations will play in meeting the unprecedented amount of needs.
- Due to lower incomes and lower levels of educational attainment among race/ethnic minority post-boomers, over the long-term future, a higher percentage may be unable to volunteer.
- Inter-generational tension is possible since generally those who are more civically engaged (e.g., seniors) may have more of their needs met compared to those who are less engaged (e.g., younger adults and children).

Potential Opportunities

- Aging baby boomers represent a potential sizeable volunteer workforce.
- Aging baby boomers represent a rich source of human capital due to relatively higher levels of educational attainment and strong work history.

- While the level of need increases, the percent of the adult population that is age 18-59 decreases and the percent of the adult population that is age 60 and older increases.
- Increased acceptance of the notion that government cannot provide solutions for all problems or provide all the services that are needed.
- There is a growing expectation that civic and faith-based organizations and their volunteers will play a more important role in providing needed services – either alone -- or in partnership with government.
- Society still expects that certain services will continue to be provided in order to maintain a reasonable quality of life and standard of living. For most, it should not matter who helps meet the needs or provides the services as long as it is done in an efficient, effective and fair manner.

Potential Solutions and Considerations

- Efforts will be needed to recruit more boomers as volunteers by incorporating flexible programs and innovative opportunities capable of capturing boomers' interests, needs and concerns.
- Policies will need to recognize the value of informal volunteerism and encourage engagement that involve different types and degrees of volunteering.
- Policies should encourage intergenerational cooperation to expose members of the younger generation to the values and contributions of senior volunteers and to re-enforce the values, needs and contributions for people of all ages.
- Organizations should develop research-based best practices at all stages of the service delivery process (needs assessment, volunteer recruitment, performance measures, among others) in order to gain legitimacy and the trust of citizens.